



Myers JDC
Brookdale

Licensed Accessibility Experts: Their Characteristics, Work and Professional Development

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The study was commissioned by and funded with the assistance of the Ministry of Justice.

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Jerusalem | February 2024

Abstract

Background

The Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law, 5758–1998 and the second amendment to the law (which is referred to as the “accessibility chapter”) regulate the field of accessibility for people with disabilities in Israel in a detailed and comprehensive manner. The amendment to the law also defines two roles which previously were not defined by the law: the Licensed Buildings, Infrastructure, and Environment Accessibility Expert and the Licensed Service Accessibility Expert. Licensed accessibility experts provide advice and recommendations on accessibility and oversee their implementation in practice, as part of their role of ensuring the compliance of those obligated by the law. The Commission for Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities (herein: the Commission) is responsible for the implementation of the law and the professional advancement of accessibility experts in a variety of contexts. The Commission requested that the Myers-Joint-Brookdale Institute carry out a first-of-its-kind survey among active accessibility experts in Israel.

Objectives

1. To examine the activity of accessibility experts and their professional development options – such as training and seminars, their access to the Commission and the responses they receive, and their relations with their clients – in order to identify their needs and how to address them.
2. To examine issues and challenges facing accessibility experts – such as difficulties in implementing the law, dealing with resistance, and regulatory issues – in order to understand their needs and identify the tools needed to promote and implement accessibility.

Method

An online self-administered survey was distributed to all accessibility experts recognized by the Commission (a total of 1,025 of whom approximately 500 had professional accreditation and were active during the two years preceding the survey). 156 of the relevant (accredited and active) accessibility experts responded (a 30% response rate).

Main Findings

The area of expertise of accessibility experts can be categorized according to the type of their accreditation: service accessibility (25%), buildings, infrastructure and environment accessibility (37%, of whom 23% are architects or engineers and 14% are practical engineers) and those with both accreditations (38%). About one-half have been active in this field for between 5 and 10 years. Most accessibility experts are self-employed (79%) and/or promote accessibility for various clients (87%). About one-half devote all or most of their time to accessibility, particularly the service accessibility experts and those with both licenses.

Accessibility experts encounter problems in their everyday work due to the low level of awareness of accessibility and the unwillingness to implement it (particularly among small businesses) and as a result of the complexity of complying with the requirements of the accessibility regulations (particularly in the case of small businesses, health services and municipalities). Another major difficulty reported by the accessibility experts is the client's or organization's claim that they have an insufficient budget to implement the requirements of the law. Accessibility experts deal with these problems primarily by explaining the law and the regulations, the importance of their implementation for people with disabilities, and the existing mechanisms for enforcement of the law among those who do not comply.

Accessibility experts interact with the Commission on two main levels: The first is receiving updates on developments in accessibility and participating in professional seminars, while the second is through queries made by accessibility experts on various topics related to their everyday work. With respect to the first level, most accessibility experts keep abreast of developments in accessibility primarily through information distributed by the Commission, through its website, seminars, and professional training. 62% of the accessibility experts were satisfied or very satisfied with the Commission's seminars. With respect to the second level, the survey revealed that 74% of the accessibility experts had been in contact with the Commission during the two years prior to the survey and 44% had been in contact on two to four occasions. The main subjects of the enquiries to the Commission were: questions regarding the law or the regulations, requests for an exemption from the law's requirements and informal enquiries. The level of satisfaction with the responses from the Commission ranged from 29% to 46% on average. The accessibility experts reported that they would like to receive a more rapid response from the Commission on issues that arise in their everyday work.

Main Recommendations

- **Standardizing the status and professional development of accessibility experts:** It would be worth considering the transfer of authority for the professional aspects of the work of the accessibility experts from the Ministry of Labor to the Commission. This will facilitate greater efficiency in dealing with issues such as the content of professional training for accessibility experts; increasing enforcement in cases of accessibility experts who do not implement the requirements of the law; and standardizing the status of buildings, infrastructure, and environment accessibility experts who are practical engineers.
- **Providing tools for accessibility experts in their everyday work:** The accessibility experts should be provided with tools to explain the law and its significance to clients; to consult with the Commission and receive quick responses in cases where implementing the regulations is particularly complex; and to present the decisions of the Commission and professional knowledge for accessibility experts on a convenient platform. They should also have access to seminars and professional training with emphasis on the work of accessibility experts in the field and a professional community of accessibility experts should be established.
- **Improving access to the Commission:** As part of a process of organizational change that the Commission is promoting to improve its response to enquiries, the following aspects should be addressed: the professional staff that responds to the enquiries of accessibility experts; the efficient routing of enquiries to the most relevant staff member; shortening the response time; and the establishment of an “express” line for recurring queries.
- **Promoting initiatives on the policy level:** Steps should be taken to increase enforcement to achieve greater compliance with accessibility regulations; to increase enforcement by local authorities; and to raise awareness among those who are obligated by the law.